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## THE COOLANGATTA STATEMENT ON INDIGENOUS RIGHTS IN EDUCATION

**Editor's Note:** This Statement is being presented in its entirety as it appears on the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education internet site ([www.wipcehawaii.org](http://www.wipcehawaii.org)). It is a work-in-progress which stands as testament to the common educational concerns of all Indigenous People throughout the world and to their dedication to reversing the processes of colonization through reclamation and redefinition of their systems of education

### INTRODUCTION

The document that was submitted for discussion and refinement to all Indigenous participants at the 1993 Conference was prepared by a Task Force who met in Coolangatta, New South Wales, between September 24 and October 1. The Task Force was commissioned by the National Organizing Committee of the 1993 World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education to outline a framework for discussing Indigenous Peoples' Education Rights.

Members of the Task Force were drawn from America, Canada, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia. They are:

- Bob Morgan: Director, Jumbunna Aboriginal Education Centre, University of Technology Sydney, and Chair, National Organising Committee of the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference: Education

- Errol West: Associate Professor and Director of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders Education Centre, James Cook University, North Queensland
- Martin Nakata: Torres Strait Islander, PhD student at James Cook University
- Kez Hall: Kungarakany, Aboriginal human rights activist and community worker, Finniss River, Northern Territory
- Karen Swisher: Standing Rock Sioux, Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Indian Education at Arizona State University, U.S.A.
- Freda Ahenakew: Cree, Professor, Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada
- Dr Paul Hughes: Co-Ordinator, Aboriginal Education Curriculum Unit, South Australian Education Department
- Tania Ka'ai: Te Whanau-a-Ruataupare, Ngati Porou, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Maori Education, Auckland College of Education, Aotearoa (New Zealand)
- Nerida Blair: Co-Ordinator, World Indigenous Peoples' Conference: Education Secretariat

The Task Force believes that for all Indigenous Nations to be represented in an International Instrument on Indigenous Peoples' Education Rights, time must be spent on debating and discussing the nature, purpose and contents of such an Instrument.

It is anticipated that the result of these debates/discussions will be a more refined document that derives from Indigenous Nations; a document that can be put to use by individuals, communities and Nations throughout the world in their struggle to establish

education systems which reflect and embrace the cultural values, philosophies and ideologies that have shaped and guided Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. It is therefore inappropriate to consider or measure this document within Western educational frames of reference.

### **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR SPECIAL FOCUS FORUM DISCUSSION**

The Task Force recommends that the Coolangatta Statement be viewed as a stimulus document towards the eventual preparation of an International Instrument on Indigenous Peoples' rights in education.

The central focus of the Coolangatta Statement is the principle that Indigenous Peoples have the inalienable right to be Indigenous, which includes the right to self-determination.

The Coolangatta Statement also addresses other fundamental principles which are considered vital to achieving the reform and the transformation of Indigenous education. Other principles and issues for discussion might include all, or any, of the following:

- i. Indigenous control of Indigenous education;
- ii. Indigenous education as a means of protecting, preserving and developing Indigenous cultures;
- iii. The philosophy and principles of Indigenous education;
- iv. Quality and exemplary Indigenous education models;
- v. Indigenous teacher education programs;
- vi. The role and responsibilities of non-Indigenous peoples in Indigenous education;

- vii. Indigenous education standards and terms of reference;
- viii. Racism;
- ix. Indigenous education and gender participation patterns;
- x. Sexism;
- xi. Ethics of Indigenous education research and development;
- xii. Indigenous education and human rights;
- xiii. Indigenous schooling/post-schooling Learning Centers; and
- xiv. Indigenous Studies/Cultural Studies.

Attention might also be given to related areas, such as:

- xv. What should an Instrument on Indigenous education rights be called?
- xvi. What is a reasonable time frame for the finalization of a final document? Is the 1996 WIPC:E a reasonable goal?
- xvii. What processes could/should be adopted to facilitate finalizing a document?
- xviii. Who could/should be involved in any further processes adopted to finalize a document?

In adopting this workshop approach to a stimulus document for discussion, the Task Force is confident that the result will be a refined instrument which derives its visions and strengths from Indigenous Nations.

### **THE COOLANGATTA STATEMENT - PREAMBLE**

In preparing for the 1996 World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPC:E), members of the National Organizing Committee have adopted as one of the

key objectives for the conference, the final drafting of an instrument on Indigenous education rights and freedoms.

The need for such an instrument is self evident. Over the last 30 years Indigenous people throughout the world have argued that they have been denied equity in non-Indigenous education systems, and that non-Indigenous education systems have failed to provide education services which are both scholarly and culturally nurturing.

Almost all Indigenous peoples, and in particular, those who have suffered the impact and effects of colonization, have struggled to access education that acknowledges, respects and promotes the right of Indigenous people to be Indigenous.

## **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION: A GLOBAL OVERVIEW**

1.1 There exists a proliferation of international charters, conventions and other instruments that recognize the basic human rights of all peoples, amongst which is the right to education. Some of these instruments have been analyzed in the preparation of this statement. These include:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination;
- Discrimination (Employment & Occupation) Convention;
- Convention Against Discrimination in Education;
- Working Group on Indigenous Populations - Draft Declaration on Indigenous Rights;
- and Kari-Oca Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter.

1.2 It is acknowledged that select principles and articles from international human rights instruments provide some basis for recognizing the Rights of Indigenous people to education.

1.2.1 For example, Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states:

- i. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- ii. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- iii. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

1.2.2 Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights further states:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own

culture, and to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language.

1.3 Notwithstanding the capacity for such instruments to provide some basis for recognizing some Rights of Indigenous people, the 1996 WIPC:E asserts that such instruments are limited in their capacity to recognize and protect the rights of Indigenous people.

Human rights, by definition, are inalienable, inviolable and innate. The freedom to enjoy and indeed celebrate these rights have been, and continue to be, denied and obstructed for Indigenous people throughout the world.

Specific limitations include the extent to which these instruments:

- Protect the right of Indigenous people to equal access to education systems;
- Ensure that Indigenous parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children;
- Promote the right of Indigenous people to enjoy their own cultures in community with other members of their group;
- Provide conditions that are conducive to the use and maintenance of Indigenous languages.

1.3.1 Historically, Indigenous people have insisted upon the right of access to education. Invariably the nature, and consequently the outcome, of this education has been constructed through and measured by non-Indigenous standards, values and philosophies. Ultimately the purpose of this education

has been to assimilate Indigenous people into non-Indigenous cultures and societies.

Volumes of studies, research and reports dealing with Indigenous people in non-Indigenous education systems paint a familiar picture of failure and despair. When measured in non-Indigenous terms, the educational outcomes of Indigenous people are still far below that of non-Indigenous people. This fact exists not because Indigenous people are less intelligent, but because educational theories and practices have been developed and controlled by non-Indigenous people. Thus, in more recent times, due to the involvement of Indigenous people, research shows that failure is indeed present, but that this failure is that of the system, not of Indigenous people.

In this context the so-called drop-out rates and failures of Indigenous people within non-Indigenous education systems should be viewed for what they really are - rejection rates.

1.3.2 The right of Indigenous people to access education - even when this right is recognized in treaties and other instruments - has often been (mis)interpreted to read that Indigenous people only want access to non-Indigenous education. Presumably it has been considered that the core of Indigenous cultural values, standards and wisdom have been abandoned or are withering in the wilderness of Indigenous societies.

Yet, Indigenous people across the world are demanding, and are in fact achieving, the establishment of systems of education which reflect, respect and embrace Indigenous cultural values, philosophies and ideologies; the same values, philosophies and ideologies which have shaped, nurtured and sustained Indigenous people for tens of thousands of years.

One of the greatest challenges confronting Indigenous people in the final years of the twentieth century is how to promote, protect and nurture Indigenous cultures in an ever-changing modern society. This is of particular concern for Indigenous people who have been forced into cities and away from their homelands.

1.4 It is of concern to the 1996 WIPC:E that many international instruments have a limited capacity to recognize the most fundamental human right of Indigenous people - the right to be Indigenous. The right to be Indigenous involves the freedom of Indigenous people themselves to determine who is Indigenous, what it means to be Indigenous, and how education relates to Indigenous cultures.

1.4.1 Recently a number of international documents have been prepared in response to the limited capacity of international human rights instruments to recognize and protect the right of Indigenous People to be Indigenous. The 1996 WIPC:E acknowledges and supports such documents, which include the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the Kari-Oca Indigenous Peoples' Earth Charter.

1.4.2 The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, as revised by the members of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in July 1993, asserts that:

Indigenous people have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. (Article 3)

Indigenous people have the right to participate fully, if they so wish, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state, while maintaining their distinct political, economic, social and cultural characteristics, as well as their legal systems. (Article 4)

The draft declaration goes on to add that:

Indigenous people have the right to all levels and forms of education. They also have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own language. (Article 14)

Indigenous people have the right to have the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations appropriately reflected in all forms of education and public information. States shall take effective measures, in consultation with Indigenous people, in eliminating prejudice and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations. (Article 15)

1.4.3 The Kari-Oca Declaration entitled “Indigenous Peoples’ Earth Charter” (formulated in Brazil in May 1993) includes the following statements on Indigenous education:

Indigenous people should have the right to their own knowledge, languages and culturally appropriate education, including bicultural and bilingual education. Through recognizing both formal and informal ways the participation of family and community is guaranteed.

Indigenous people must have the necessary resources and control over their own education systems. Elders must be recognized and respected as teachers of the young people. Indigenous wisdom must be recognized and encouraged.

The use of existing Indigenous languages is our right. These languages must be protected. At local, national, and international levels, governments must commit funds to new and existing resources to education and training for Indigenous people to achieve their sustainable development, to contribute and to participate in sustainable and equitable development at all levels.

Particular attention should be given to Indigenous women, children and youth.

The United Nations should promote research into Indigenous knowledge and develop a network of Indigenous sciences. As creators and carriers of civilizations which have given and continue to share knowledge, experience and values with humanity, we require that our right to intellectual and cultural

properties be guaranteed and that the mechanism for each implementation be in favor of our people and studies in depth be implemented.

1.5 It is evident from recent international documents on the Rights of Indigenous people that the right to be Indigenous is an essential prerequisite to developing and maintaining culturally appropriate and sustainable education for Indigenous people.

It is also evident that the educational struggles of the Indigenous people of the world involve more than the struggle for access to and participation in both non-Indigenous education systems and culturally-appropriate education.

The educational struggles of Indigenous people are fundamentally and unequivocally concerned with the right of Indigenous people to be Indigenous.

1.6 Youth and the young have a special place and responsibility in the struggle to nurture and protect Indigenous cultures. It is to them that truths and wisdoms are bequeathed. When Indigenous youth and the young are separated from their cultural base and communities, Indigenous cultures and people are threatened with cultural extinction.

1.6.1 The forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities was a favored policy and practice of colonial powers throughout the world. The pain and emotional scars that are the legacy of this insidious form of cultural genocide continues to torment many of today's Indigenous people.

1.6.2 Acknowledging and respecting their role and responsibilities, delegates from the World Indigenous Youth Conference held in Darwin, Australia in July 1993, declared that:

We, Indigenous youth, believe we must maintain our right to self-determination. Our people have the right to decide our own forms of government, the use of our lands, to one day raise and educate our children in our own cultural identities without interference. We, Indigenous youth must have the freedom to learn our true histories. We make a call to our elders to open the way for us to learn about our heritages: to help us reclaim our past, so that we may claim our future. We, Indigenous youth, recognize our languages as an important link to maintaining our cultures. Indigenous languages must be maintained at a local level.

1.7 The 1993 WIPC:E recognized that there exists a commonality of purpose and desire amongst the Indigenous people of the world for education. It further recognizes that this commonality involves a shared belief that education must be scholarly and empowering whilst at the same time the processes of education must be embedded in Indigenous culture and wisdom.

1.7.1 Meaningful, empowering and culturally sustainable education for Indigenous people will be possible only when Indigenous people have the control (a fundamental right) and the resources (an inarguable responsibility

of States/governments) to develop educational theories, curriculum and practices that are Indigenous and to determine the environment within which this education can best occur.

1.7.2 Indigenous self-determination involves choice and diversity. If an Indigenous person chooses to access an Indigenous education system, then that is a choice which must be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access non-Indigenous education, then that is a choice which must be respected. If an Indigenous person chooses to access both non-Indigenous and Indigenous systems of education, then that is a choice which must be respected. Not to do so is in itself a violation of a basic human right.

## RIGHTS IN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

2.1 The right to be Indigenous is the most fundamental and important of all Human Rights.

2.2 The right to be Indigenous is a precursor to self-determination. The right to self-determination and the achievement of other inherent rights and freedoms for Indigenous people is inextricably connected to the physical and spiritual phenomenon of what most call "the earth." The sense of connectedness and belonging to Mother Earth is similar to the special bonds that unite parent and child. As a child's hopes and securities, aspirations and comforts are

fundamental to its relationships with its parents, so are Indigenous peoples' relationship to Mother Earth.

2.2.1 Non-Indigenous people and their representative governments must accept this parent relationship with Mother Earth that characterises Indigenous cultures. This relationship enables Indigenous people to negotiate, use and maintain the land, and to build and rebuild the social structures needed for cultural survival.

2.2.2 There are no single, simple or common answers to the question of Indigenous self-determination. Only those that are spiritually focused and land-based.

2.2.3 The provision and application of material and political responses by Nation States to the right of Indigenous people to self-determination, governance and control over Indigenous life and futures must cease.

2.2.4 Self-determination in Indigenous education embodies the right of Indigenous people to:

- Control/govern Indigenous education systems;
- Establish schools and other learning facilities that recognize, respect and promote Indigenous values, philosophies and ideologies;

- Develop and implement culturally inclusive curricula;
- Utilize the essential wisdom of Indigenous elders in the education process;
- Establish the criterion for educational evaluation and assessment;
- Define and identify standards for the gifted and talented;
- Promote the use of Indigenous languages in education;
- Establish the parameters and ethics within which Indigenous education research should be conducted;
- Design and deliver culturally appropriate and sensitive teacher training programs;
- Participate in teacher certification and selection;
- Develop criterion for the registration and operation of schools and other learning facilities;
- and Choose the nature and scope of education without prejudice.

2.3 The feelings and thoughts Indigenous people have about the land forms the very basis of our cultural identity. Land gives life to language and culture.

2.3.1 Indigenous languages in all forms are a legitimate, valid means of communication for Indigenous people.

2.3.2 Language is a social construct, it is a blueprint for thought, behavior, social and cultural interaction and self-expression.

2.3.3 Language is the medium for transmitting culture from the past to the present and into the future. Acknowledging that many Indigenous languages have been destroyed, the 1993 WIPC:E nevertheless asserts that Indigenous languages are the best way to teach Indigenous knowledge and values.

2.3.4 Languages can be the foundation for the liberation of thought, that which provides direction for social, political and economic change and development.

2.3.5 The survival, and where practicable the revival, of Indigenous languages is imperative for the protection, transmission, maintenance and preservation of Indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and wisdom.

2.4 Pedagogy is the interrelationship between learning styles and teaching methods. There are pedagogical principles shared by all Indigenous people, but there are also those which are characteristic to the specific cultures, languages, environment and circumstances of Indigenous people across the world. Indigenous people and cultures are not homogenous.

2.4.1 Indigenous pedagogical principles are holistic, connected, valid, culturally and value- based, thematic and experiential. They promote and reward cooperative learning and the unified co-operation of learner and teacher in a single educational enterprise. They describe who teaches, as

well as, how and when teaching occurs. Indigenous pedagogical principles, unlike western paradigms, recognize the important role of non-verbal communication in the learning-teaching process.

2.4.2 Indigenous learning is clothed in the medium of spirituality. Notions of well-being/wellness and ethos therefore are important in the process of learning.

2.4.3 The teacher is a facilitator of learning, one who promotes achievement and success. In this context culturally appropriate environments are employed to reinforce knowledge being imparted to the learner which then reaffirms the learner's significant place in the world.

2.4.4 The involvement of community in all pedagogical processes is valued.

2.5 How and to what degree non-Indigenous people are involved in Indigenous education must be determined by Indigenous people at the local level. Once this role is determined it is the responsibility of non-Indigenous people to respect and adhere to the wishes of the local community.

2.5.1 Because non-Indigenous people come from a different cultural background and because Indigenous education is centered in Indigenous culture, non-Indigenous people must only be involved in the process of

achieving educational objectives as determined by Indigenous people. They, non-Indigenous people, should not involve themselves in the processes of Indigenous decision-making.

2.5.2 Non-Indigenous people through the various levels of government and bureaucracy have an over-riding responsibility to accept and uphold the education rights of Indigenous people and to know that these rights and freedoms are not negotiable.

## CONCLUSION

- 3.1 Indigenous people throughout the world have survived policies and practices ranging from extermination and genocide to protection and assimilation. It is this, perhaps more than any other, which is the greatest of all Indigenous peoples' achievements.
- 3.2 Indigenous people have the right to be Indigenous. We cannot exist as images and reflections of a non-Indigenous society.
- 3.3 Indigenous education, as a medium for both personal development and intellectual empowerment, is critical for the continuance and celebration of Indigenous cultures.

3.4 To be Indigenous is both a privilege and a birthright. It is therefore the responsibility of all Indigenous people to ensure that our respective cultures, philosophies and ideologies remain strong and continue to grow.

3.5 We, the Indigenous people of the world, assert our inherent right to self-determination in all matters. Self-determination is about making informed choices and decisions. It is about creating appropriate structures for the transmission of culture, knowledge and wisdom for the benefit of each of our respective cultures. Education for our communities and each individual is central to the preservation of our cultures and for the development of the skills and expertise we need in order to be a vital part of the twenty first century.

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